

The Design of Everyday Things

“If everyday design were ruled by aesthetics, life might be more pleasing to the eye but less comfortable; if ruled by usability, it might be more comfortable but uglier. If cost or ease of manufacture dominated, products might not be attractive, functional, or durable” (151).

The Design of Everyday Things, written by Donald A. Norman, describes a designer's journey through the creation of everyday products. While outdated and monotonous, the book expresses insightful narration on seemingly trivial items. Norman goes into a lot of detail while discussing the history of doors, telephones, typewriters, stovetops, and even knobs and faucets. A main theme in the book is the incredible amount of human psychology that should be involved in making intelligent design decisions.

Norman goes into detail about how individuals experience a mental stress, psychopathology, in their common tasks due to the design of everyday products. The job of the designer is to reduce the psychopathology caused by products and to make the everyday tasks simple and effortless. One method of making tasks simpler is mapping. Mapping is the arrangement of buttons and controls in order to ease a user's decision making process while he or she is conducting a task. The adjustment setting of a power car seat is a great example of mapping: the chair moves in the same direction as the user pushes the control button. A stove top is another example: the knobs are usually located in a way that is easy for users to understand which burner correlates with which turn knob. Another concept that the book explains is a constraint. Constraints are physical hang-ups when using a product. The book describes how there are eight ways to place a floppy disk into a drive; but only one is correct. The designer created the floppy disk to have physical constraints that do not allow seven of the ways to work.

Designers also have to realize how and when products will be used and whether the product will require short-term memory or long-term memory. Different types of memory include arbitrary memory (how to tie a shoe), meaningful relationship memory (a car's turn signal in relation to direction), and memory from explanation (how to put together a toy with a manual). Depending on the product situation, designers have to know which memory model to focus on, or users “are likely to make up inappropriate ones” (70).

Norman conducted a small study where he asked adults to put together a Lego police motorcycle and person, a kit of thirteen parts, with no instructions (see next page). The assembly process includes a handful of constraints. Cultural constraints explain where the placement of the headlight and brake light should go. Semantic constraints, knowledge of the world and situation, describe how the Lego person is constructed and placed on the motorcycle. Physical constraints include how it is impossible to put the windshield on any other way than the correct way due to its design. Last but not least, the final blue light is placed logically because there is only one spot left. It is a designer's goal to make a process easy to deduce by utilizing conceptual models and process mapping in order to inform the user.

